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ABSTRACT

Very brief welcoming remarks (1) assert that true educational improvement takes place in the classroom, (2) provide examples of productive and nonproductive educational initiatives, and (3) challenge the Secretary of Education to eliminate unnecessary federal government intrusion into schools. (RH)

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GOVERNOR ROBERT D. ORR
SPEECH TO NATIONAL FORUM ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION
December 6, 1983

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Thank you Gary Jones, and to Secretary Bell and the many governors, educators, legislators and concerned citizens who have converged on Indianapolis for this National Forum on Excellence in Education -- welcome!

The next two days represent an unprecedented opportunity for citizens from all walks of life and with varied interests in education to come together and share ideas for renewing educational excellence in America.

We here in Indiana are eager to share the gains we've made in realigning our educational goals with the economic realities of a changing world. Gary Jones was right when he said that Indiana was out front on education long before the national debate caught fire. Even while the ink was drying last spring on the major recommendations of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, Indiana had already taken action in those areas critical to educational improvement.

But true to our modest nature, Indiana's accomplishments have often gone unpromoted. For example:

-- We've increased graduation requirements for high school by adding more math, science and English to the curriculum.

-- We've added a new basic to education -- computer literacy. And we're backing up this requirement by offering state assistance for schools which need help in acquiring computer equipment.

-- We're offering incentives in the form of loan forgiveness and retraining funds to attract and keep teachers in the classroom.

-- In addition, we're encouraged by the results of an experimental program we implemented two years ago to give young schoolchildren a strong foundation in math and reading by reducing class size in kindergarten through second grade. We call it Project Primetime, and it operates in 65 classrooms throughout Indiana.

Indiana, like many other states represented at this forum, has taken positive strides toward improving education. Much remains to be accomplished, however. A full slate of initiatives will be before our legislature when it convenes in January. Through its deliberations, as well as through the work of groups such as my Select Advisory Commission on Primary and Secondary Education and our State Board of Education, we will continue to keep educational reform at the top of Indiana's agenda.

Certainly the discussions that take place in this forum will add to the debate in state capitals and school corporations across the country, and I thank you, Secretary Bell, for focusing national attention not only on the challenges facing education, but --for a few days at least -- on Indiana.

In the excitement and euphoria of this meeting, however, I want to share with you a concern of mine -- a concern that the very enthusiasm which feeds this movement endangers it.

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If any one of us believes that what transpires here in Indianapolis will make a real difference for education, we are wrong.

For there is only one place where true educational improvement can be achieved and that's where learning takes place -- in the classroom.

If you leave Indianapolis with nothing else, you should leave with this perspective. That getting results in education won't come from the federal government or from state government. Results will come from actions, decisions and commitments made in our home towns.

A perfect example of local citizens taking responsibility for renewing educational excellence comes from a recent newspaper report about Elmwood, Illinois. Here is a middle-America school system that three years ago had students scoring below the state and national averages on college entrance exams. Discipline was poor, the staff was demoralized and the curriculum had degenerated to the point where students spent almost as much time in study halls as they did in classrooms.

No more.

Acting on its own, long before the state of Illinois began talking about increasing high school graduation requirements, the Elmwood school board raised its standards. In the words of the high school principal, they just didn't want to be simply "custodians" for pupils any longer. "We want to draw out of these kids at least their potential," he said. "We're telling them that they can be better than what they are."

Today, Elmwood students are getting more math, more science, more English and more homework than ever before. And if test results tell a story, last year, students at Elmwood High School topped the national average by more than two points and the state average by almost three.

There are other examples of local citizens taking on the responsibility for education. One is right here in Indianapolis, where the Chamber of Commerce, working with the city school system, has introduced an innovative partners in education program. Businesses like Detroit Diesel Allison, Lilly, Indiana Bell and others adopt a school. Their employees volunteer to tutor, teach classes and organize special projects that introduce students to the real-life problems of the work-a-day world.

This is where the action is. This is the type of activity that will rekindle the spirit of American education. And our responsibility -- yours and mine -- is to help light the flame of local initiative. If we do anything at all, we should first, become personally involved in education at the local level, and second, help create an atmosphere that promotes local innovation and control.

How do we create this atmosphere? Not by telling the school board in Boise, Idaho, how much to pay its teachers. Not by mandating that teachers in Ethel, Wisconsin, use a certain textbook. Not by demanding anything.

We can best achieve greater results in education by establishing state and federal incentives that first, assure local control, and second, nourish creativity and innovation. In Indiana, I plan to do just that as we chart the course for educational improvement for the next four to five years.

We have before us important choices. And to demonstrate these choices I've brought along some unusual props.

An apple. A carrot. And a stick.

The apple symbolizes the classroom as the heart of learning and the relationship between teachers and students as the lifeblood of education.

The carrot represents the incentives and support that those of us who are not directly involved in education can provide to encourage outstanding achievement in the classroom.

And the stick? Well that represents unnecessary government intrusion into schools. The attempts by government rushing to impose specific policies and programs on local schools.

Question. Pop quiz if you will. Which of these is the least important to achieving the goals we all pursue?

The stick.

Secretary Bell, I challenge you not to use the federal stick on education. We've seen it before. Others threaten to apply it again. But the best thing you and Congress can do for education is to throw the stick away.

Don't hand down from on high, national dictates for what more properly should be state and local standards. Supplement, do not supplant our education efforts. Fund research projects like the Indiana University Center for Excellence in Education. Consider encouraging innovative programs like that in every state. Collect data that will be useful in giving us an overall picture of educational achievement in America. And then quit.

As governor, I pledge not to use the stick in Indiana. Here, we will seek innovative ways to use the carrot. And I challenge my fellow governors to do the same.

Finally, I encourage everyone to get involved in education. Volunteer. Go back to your homes and support your local schools in making positive changes. Join the parent-teacher organization. Find out what your children or your grandchildren are doing in school. And then find out what you as an individual can do to help.

For it is there --where you live -- that you can have the most impact. This forum is but a springboard for action. Results will be achieved at home.

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